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Who Sees Johnson?

★ We can't get used to the lack of weekly White House press conferences. We think them essential in the twin Vietnam and Santo Domingo crises. The country needs them and Mr. Johnson needs them too.

In old days the country kept in touch by debate in Congress. That vanished with television. Meanwhile Washington had invented the White House press conference. It was an indispensable tool of democracy. Much of the current commotion and confusion comes from dropping it. (The new "teach-in" technique may help fill part of the void.) Aides can't replace the President. Impromptu TV appearances aren't enough. The formal press conference is the equivalent of the House of Commons question time, and it is needed most during a crisis.

Mr. Johnson is a hard man to understand. When he holds a rare, formal White House press conference he does it well. It is a tool that, we should think, he would grab. We say this sympathetically. We have not abandoned hopes in Vietnam, and we are prepared to give him the benefit of a lot of doubts. But what are we to believe?

We had been told, for example, that the Organization of American States was not informed before US intervention in Santo Domingo. Now comes the semi-official announcement from columnist Drew Pearson that the OAS was notified. There has been no press conference to clear this up.

Mr. Johnson has replaced the orderly press conference with a system of self-imposed confusion. Dozens of individual reporters see him in off-the-record personal interviews. Scores trot around

with him in the rose garden, trying to catch ideas on the fly. "What did he say? What did he say?" There never was a time when so many news stories appeared on the authority of "a high government source." It is exasperating to get information on such a basis.

A reporter asked Mr. Johnson not long ago whether a lull in bombing would not be a good idea? It was before the President actually tested the plan. Mr. Johnson sniffed and responded, "Why, I gave them one; I did no bombing today." It is all on a personal basis. Mr. Johnson picks the sites, launches the plane, releases the bombs.

Washington buzzes with stories of private interviews. Mr. Johnson does most of the talking, he seems to get a kind of release out of it. The visiting reporter notes the three-screen TV, showing major networks side by side. The President controls it remotely. The AP and UPI news tickers murmur in his office. He follows opinion polls avidly.

A current story is of a reporter closeted with Mr. Johnson. "What's on your mind?" asks the President cordially. As always he speaks with friendly simplicity. The reporter clears his throat. But before he can speak Mr. Johnson describes improved rice and pork production in South Vietnam. Five minutes later the President asks, "Well, what's your complaint?" The reporter has no complaint and clears his throat again. This time Mr. Johnson explains the low per capita income of Vietnamese peasants, down to a miserable \$50 a year. He interrupts himself to look at the news ticker. "Who leaked this?" he demands of an aide. "Find out and stop it." The dazed reporter leaves with little knowledge. The President urges him to come back any time, whenever he has any more questions.

Some Get Richer . . .

★ If you really want to worry about something in a big way why not try the growing disparity between rich and poor countries. We guess it is the biggest issue for the next 100 years.

Already it affects Vietnam and Santo Domingo. But that's just the start. Population is growing faster than food. But that's only part of it. The rich are getting richer, the poor, poorer; only it's nations, not people. Barbara Ward

said the gap is widening "between a white, complacent, highly bourgeois, very wealthy, very small North Atlantic elite and everybody else. . . ." Everybody else is a lot of people. Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal, in Washington recently, says things are moving toward a "world calamity." He sees "mass starvation" coming in 10 years. Just a little bit more hunger, he says, will push the masses over the brink in half a dozen spots in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Myrdal also notes that the disparity is growing. The rate of food production jumps in the US but is stagnant in India. The Dominican per capita income, \$240 a year, has hardly increased in four years. Most of the poorer countries depend on exports; when prices of wool, rubber, cocoa, coffee or sugar sink it aids the rich countries, ruins the have-nots.

In a vague way we all know this. But the rich, white "North Atlantic" elite are not really prepared to do much. Experts at the UN estimate that only about one-half of one percent of the income of the wealthy industrial countries is now going to help underdeveloped countries. People won't starve passively. Misery makes Communists. What in the world the US will do if another revolt like Santo Domingo's erupts in Latin America we can't imagine; the US is suffering from an acute Cuba fixation and presumably will send in the Marines at the drop of a hat by the Goldwater faction at the White House.

Popularity and Prosperity

★ Here at home meanwhile President Johnson's popularity is linked closely to prosperity. It lubricates everything. It is the most extraordinary expansion in peacetime history, now in its 51st month. It is man-made, too, the result of planning. It is the luscious fruit of modern economics; using the budget to sustain growth. It helped defeat Goldwater, steamroller Congress, mute criticism on foreign policy. As the *London Economist* notes, "Business Loves Lyndon." Labor loves him, too. We think Mr. Johnson can keep his unique consensus in being just so long as he can keep the economy rising. When it falters, look out.